Sensitivity in Essay Writing

Academic writing is intentionally critical, judgmental and objective. However, that is not to say that your essay should be deliberately insensitive! Inferiority and exclusion can be implied, even when we do not intend to do so, so there are several techniques you can use in your writing in order to maintain sensitivity and improve your writing style.

Avoiding Bias

Open discussion is at the very heart of academic writing. Objectivity is key, and evidence is presented in a way that stimulates critique and judgement and encourages debate. However, this does not mean that an essay is the setting for strong opinions, so be mindful that your presentation of points of view do not inadvertently demonstrate bias. To overcome this, you can:

- Avoid emotive language, such as 'horrible', "wonderful', 'inflict' etc. which can be used to skew positive or negative bias
- Avoid exaggeration and words such as 'very', 'really' and 'quite'
- Back up your writing with evidence!

(Osmond, 2013, pp. 19-23)

Gender-fair Language

In the past, the words 'man' or pronouns such as 'he' were used in writing, and academic writing, when referring to unspecified people, regardless of their gender. Yet, this use of language is outdated for several reasons:

- It misrepresents work conducted by individuals of other genders
- It focuses on the gender of the individual, rather than the work they are undertaking.
- It indicates bias, whether intentional or not

(Oakes, 1998)

Although English does not have many obvious, gender-neutral alternatives, there are ways around this:

	Don't say:	Say:
Gender-neutral titles	Fireman or Chairwoman	**Fire fighter** or **Chair person**
Plural nouns	He states that...	**Researchers state that...**
Generic Referral	Mankind or Man-made	**Humanity** or **Manufactured**
Use of articles	She suggests...	**A suggestion is...**

Neutral Language

In academic writing, it is good practice to avoid potentially exclusive language, as it shows your assessor that you are sensitive to wider issues. Stereotypes should be avoided at all costs, especially when referring to individuals or groups based on their gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, physical and mental abilities, sexuality, marital status or political beliefs. Your essay should be written in a style that stimulates debate, but does not perpetuate stereotypes (College Writing Centre, 2013) or potentially offend your reader (Edanz, 2011). Some way of doing this are:

- Be mindful of your use of adjectives as some might be contextually questionable or patronising i.e. *little old lady*
- Use modifiers cautiously and contextually, for example, *an intelligent group of female students* might imply that female students are not typically intelligent! Instead, use *an intelligent group of students* or *a group of female students* (Queen's University, 2018)
- Avoid using taboo language as this will potentially offend your reader, upset the formality of your writing and undermine your abilities as an academic

Demographics in Research

When writing about humans, it might be necessary to draw upon demographic details such as age, ethnicity, gender or sexuality, to present findings or discuss whether findings can be applied to populations at large. It is important that in writing about these facets, you do not make comparisons that imply abnormalities or superiority. (University of Leicester, 2018).

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